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Officials Report Progress in Weather Satellite Effort

By KENNETH CHANG

A program to build a new generation of weather satellites that is billions of dollars over budget, years behind schedule and now cut back in scope is finally on a realistic track, officials told a Congressional oversight committee yesterday.

But members of the House Committee on Science remained wary, and criticized the Defense Department, which is in charge of the contracts to build the satellites, for not sharing information underlying its new budget and schedule projections.

The department announced Monday that the number of satellites, which would have military and civilian uses, would be reduced to four from six and that several scientific instruments to monitor Earth's climate had been dropped.

The price tag for the smaller system has nonetheless risen to $11.5 billion, up from the original estimate of $7 billion, and the launching of the first satellite has been pushed back to 2013, five years later than planned.

Representative Sherwood Boehlert, Republican of New York and chairman of the science committee, said that the new plans appeared plausible, but that "we need more information to move from plausible to credible to persuasive."

Mr. Boehlert said that the committee had requested basic information on Tuesday and that it had received some documents an hour before the hearing yesterday afternoon.

"For an agency whose previous cost estimates have been off by more than 66 percent to tell us, 'Trust us' is, on its surface, preposterous," he said, "and we'll not stand for it."

The program, known as National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System, was begun in 1994, a joint effort between the Defense Department, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The new satellites would replace ones now in orbit, and combining military and civilian uses was projected to reduce costs by more than $1 billion.

The program underwent a mandatory reassessment because its cost overruns had exceeded 25 percent.

Ronald M. Sega, under secretary of the Air Force, told the committee how military weather satellites had pinpointed a brief break in bad weather in Iraq and allowed an Air Force mission to drop off troops and supplies. Management problems in the program have been corrected, Dr. Sega testified.

In revising the program, Dr. Sega, as well as Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., administrator of the oceanic and atmospheric agency, and Michael D. Griffin, administrator of NASA, testified that the primary objective was to ensure that weather-observing capabilities of the new satellites matched current capabilities and that the satellites would be ready when promised.

"That is the issue that is most important to NASA," Dr. Griffin said.

A gap in weather data would create problems for researchers tracking long-term climate trends.

The satellites will fly over Earth's poles, providing data needed for short-term forecasts. The original plan called for three orbits, each covered by two satellites. Now, with only four satellites, the system will also pull information from satellites run by the European Space Agency.

Scientists are most disappointed by the instruments that were bumped off the satellites, and another instrument will be redesigned to reduce costs.

In an interview, Christopher Ruf, a professor of atmospheric, oceanic and space sciences at the University of Michigan, said that while other satellites would provide similar data, the overall capabilities would be less.

For some quick-changing weather systems like hurricanes, it would have been beneficial for all the readings to be taken at once instead of several hours apart by different satellites, Professor Ruf said.

"That was one of the big value-added things," he said.